

## **Tell Me About Your Dream, Mike Wheeler** by **fillmoredawn**

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**Summary:** Mike Wheeler is a boy who cannot sleep. And his nightmares are getting worse.

# 1. Chapter 1

The man crossed his legs and adjusted his thick glasses, peering intently about Mike all the while.

"Well Michael," he said, after waiting for Mike to speak for several long moments. "Nice to see you in my office again."

"Yeah," Mike offered, because the alternative was to say '*no it's not*' and he didn't want to be back next week.

"Your mother is very worried about you," the shrink said, as if Mike didn't already know. Mike said nothing. Instead, he looked back and forth around the office for plaques or diplomas mounted on the wall. He couldn't remember the therapist's name, even though he'd been coming every few weeks for months now. "She told me over the phone that your nightmares are back."

*They never went away*, Mike wanted to say, but bit his tongue. Somethings are better kept to yourself. Especially most of the things that ran through Mike's head these days.

"Michael. Can you tell me about your dream?"

This is how it starts: Mike is running through the woods by the train tracks, like he has before a million times. Only this time, none of his friends are with him, wielding wooden swords and slingshots. It's night, but there are no stars, and he can barely breathe he's running so hard.

He comes out of the forest by an abandoned road on the edge of a cliff and suddenly it's day and the sun is so bright it's blinding him. He turns around and Dustin is there with him. He breathes a sigh of relief to not be alone anymore, but James jumps out of the woods and presses a swiss army knife to Dustin's throat.

Mike whirls around, but Troy is there too. Only it's not Troy, it's the tall white haired man from the Department of Energy- Doctor- Doctor Brenner! He pulls a gun out from behind his long black jacket and points it at Dustin, threatening to pull the trigger if Mike doesn't

jump off the cliff's edge. Dustin is screaming for Mike not to jump, and Mike is gazing over the edge and trying to calculate if the water will save him or kill him, and then Doctor Brenner fires the gun and Dustin falls with a bullet in his brain and Mike tries to scream but his throat is frozen and he staggers backwards and falls off the edge anyway.

He's falling and falling and falling, wind rushing past him so fast it makes his ears pop. Now that it's too late his mouth is working again, and he shouts and shouts and begs for El to save him, please *please El don't let me die please please please*

And then he hits the water. He never got time to finish calculating before he fell but if he had he would have discovered the water would kill him, because he feels his spine crack when he hits.

Drifting, drifting, drifting, he sinks deeper into the water. He can't move, all his bones are broken and he's paralyzed, but his mouth is still open and he's yelling underwater and inhaling lake water and drowning. Dustin is in the lake too, Doctor Brenner must have thrown him in, and his eyes are wide open and he's glaring at Mike through two blank eyes with a bullet hole in the middle.

Mike sinks deeper, and Lucas swims up with gills and tells Mike it's all his fault, like Mike doesn't already know this. Bubbles leaving Lucas's lips as he speaks. Then Lucas starts to float upwards, but Mike is going deeper and deeper and he's moving faster than sinking. Something has a hold of his ankle.

Struggling through broken bones, Mike tilts his head downwards and sees the demogorgon with one vine-like appendage wrapped around his ankle. Mike's staring and staring, too broken to do anything else and then it morphs into El and she's begging, pleading, "Help me, Mike, help me, I'm close, I'm close, please help me."

But her grip on his ankle slackens and she's sinking faster than Mike and he can't reach her, he can't reach her, he can't even see her again she's too far she's too far she's too

And that's when Mike wakes up in bed, throat raw from screaming. Nancy is already rubbing his back when his eyes open and then the

light switches on and his mother is there with her bathrobe thrown over her nightgown, face blank with panic but Mike knows it's nothing compared to the look on his own.

"Michael?" the therapist asked, and Mike realized he'd been staring into space for well over a minute now, lost in thought.

"Sorry, what?"

"Can you tell me about your dream?"

"Yeah," Mike told him, leaning forward. The shrink raised an eyebrow and uncapped his pen for the first time of the session. "I'm at school and I'm taking a test but I realize I'm *completely* unprepared for it and then I look down and I'm *completely* naked and everyone in class is laughing at me, even my teacher. Isn't that sick?"

The therapist continued scribbling on his clipboard for a good half a minute, then stared at his notes as if he didn't quite believe he had written them.

"Well Michael, the good news is that this is a fairly common dream."

"Is it?" Mike asked, feigning ignorance. "Phew."

The man nodded, adjusting his glasses once more. "The strange thing is that your mother says you wake from these dreams choking and screaming, which isn't conducive to a good night's rest."

No, Mike wanted to tell him, *the strange thing is the girl I met last fall who can move objects with her mind and create alternate universes. This strange thing is my friend Will, who sometimes forgets which universe he's in. The strange thing is my sister Nancy, who has a shrine to her "missing" friend in her room. The strange thing is my friend Dustin, who sits in his room and listens to the same album over and over again for hours. The strange thing is my friend Lucas, who never wants to play board games in my basement anymore. The strange thing is Chief Hopper, who I see around town sometimes and wave, and he won't ever meet my eye. The strange thing is-*

"Michael?" the therapist called to him. "You with us over there?"

Michael shrugged. "Where else would I be?"

The man nodded, as if pretending to understand what Michael meant. "Let's make a deal," he said, leaning in as if he could sense he was on the verge of a major breakthrough. Mike could tell very clearly that he was not. "I've got an appointment free next Wednesday at 3 o'clock. Today is Monday. You have 9 nights until then. If you have this dream again 3 times in those 9 nights, you'll come back next Wednesday. If not, I'll tell your mother you don't have to come back until next month." He sat back in his chair, clearly very satisfied with himself.

Mike tried not to let his disgust show in his face, but it wasn't easy. "Sure," he said.

"Alrighty then," the therapist declared, standing up with a groan. It reminded Mike of the noise his father made when he pulled himself out of his armchair to head for bed. "3 dreams or more, and I'll see you next week."

"You won't see me next week," Mike told him, standing as well. He knew he'd have the dream at least 3 times, but he resolved to keep quiet about it. He'd play with Holly right before bed, listen to relaxing music, and drink tea. Anything to keep the nightmare quiet. If it came to it, he'd sleep in the basement where only full blown shouting would alert his family that he was dreaming again.

"Let's hold off saying you will or won't until next week." The man clapped Mike on the shoulder, and Mike stumbled forward. "Whoops."

He walked Mike to the waiting room, where Karen was sitting with Holly reading a stack of magazines. Karen stood quickly to greet them, and Mike tried to appear interested while the therapist told his mother of their "arrangement."

"Are you sure we shouldn't just plan to come in next Wednesday anyway?" Karen asked, and Mike groaned.

"No, Mrs. Wheeler," the therapist said with a smile that Mike despised. "This way Mike has motivation to start having better

dreams."

That statement sounded like motivation for Mike to get a new therapist, but he smiled and nodded anyway, and Karen sighed.

"Thank you, Doctor Frisina," Karen said, shaking his hand, and Mike could have shouted *ah ha!* if he wasn't so tired. "We'll see you next week."

"No, we won't," Mike insisted, and Karen grabbed Holly's hand and led her two children to the check out window.

"Sure, dear," she said, sliding her insurance card to the woman behind the desk. The secretary wrote a few notes down on a piece of paper and slid the card back.

"You're all set," she smiled. "See you next Wednesday."

"No, you won't!" Mike told her indignantly, but Karen was already leading him out of the building and to the car, more focused on getting Mike into the car than Holly. "We won't see them again next week," he said, once he had his seat belt buckled in.

"Okay," Karen agreed, but Mike could tell she wasn't really listening.

"Mom," said Mike, and Karen paused and looked at him. "We won't be coming back next week," he told her. "We really won't."

"Okay," Karen nodded, and this time it sounded like she had actually heard him. "Alright sweetie, I believe you."

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Maybe she had been wrong to, Mike thought to himself about a week later while his mother was pulling into a similar parking space. He gazed at the window, not really seeing out of the car.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Mike whispered once she had put the car in park. The ride over was silent; Holly was at home with Nancy. The bags under Mike's eyes were worse than even Jonathan's. He hadn't gotten a full night's rest in days. The dreams had gotten worse. He could *feel* Eleven, even when he was awake. She felt so close, all the time now. Mike had started falling asleep in class, drifting off for barely 10

minutes before he woke up shouting things he shouldn't have, his friends staring at him with wide eyes and open mouths each time.

"It's alright, Michael," his mother told him. She got out of the car and came around to the other side. Mike's hand was resting on the handle, but the idea to open the car door just hadn't occurred to him yet. Karen opened the door before he realized, and reached across him to unbuckle his seatbelt as well.

"Sorry," Mike repeated, so lost in thought he didn't remember saying it barely a minute ago. She was so close. She was so close.

"Who's close?" Karen asked, and Mike realized he had been talking out loud. He looked around and found himself seated in an unfamiliar waiting room. Not the one from the usual office. This one was... bluer. And bigger. Busier.

"Are we in the hospital?" Mike felt his mouth moving and his throat making noise but couldn't remember the decision to speak happening in his brain.

Karen's face tightened. "Yes," she said. "Doctor Frisina is meeting us here instead. I told you twice in the car, and at home. Do you remember?"

"No," Mike replied honestly, slumping back in the chair. There was a white wristband on his arm he didn't remember getting, but he didn't think it worth it to mention that to his mother. "Why is Doctor Frisina meeting us here? I'm supposed to meet him in his office today. I lost the deal."

Karen flinched. "Sweetheart," she said softly, "It's Friday."

Mike's brain couldn't process this. "So... I won the deal? We were supposed to meet two days ago."

"Michael, you were supposed to meet him in five days."

This information didn't make sense to Mike either. "Okay," he said. "I don't think I understand how days work."

Karen nodded without looking at him. "That's alright," she told him.

"Michael Wheeler?"

Karen looked up right away, and stood, before Mike had even realized someone had said his name. He looked up to see his therapist standing tall in front of him, wearing a white lab coat instead of his usual corduroy blazer.

"I usually see you when you're sitting," Mike blurted. The man looked at Karen, alarm written in his stretched out face, and Mike said, "I don't remember your name again."

"Frisina," he said. "Doctor Frisina. Would you come with me now, Mike?"

"Okay," Mike said, but remained seated.

"Honey." Karen put her hand on Mike's shoulder. "You have to get up now."

"Oh!" Mike realized. "Okay." He pushed himself out of the chair, standing on two unsteady feet.

"Follow me, Michael," Doctor Frisina told him, and started to turn.

"Doctor," Karen called to him. "You should- Could you take his arm, please?"

"Oh, of course." The therapist took Mike by the arm and led him out of the waiting room. As they were leaving, Mike took one look behind him and saw his mother still standing by the chairs.

"She's not coming with?" Mike meant to say, but instead his mouth formed different words.

"Yes, she is close," Doctor Frisina assured him, not understanding what Mike was saying. "She'll be in the waiting room the whole time, and she'll be in with you in not too long. We just have to talk for a few minutes alone first."

"She's close," Mike said again. "She's so close."

"Yes."



"She's close."

"Alright."

"I could almost reach out and touch her."

"No, Michael. She's in the waiting room."

"..."

"Michael?"

"Almost. She's very, very close."

***A/N: Reviews are very, very appreciated! If wanted, reviews can be paid for with a picture of my dog. Just specify if you want me to contact you about it in your review.***

***I'm also on ao3 under the same username as well as Tumblr at save-will-byers. Thanks for reading!***

## 2. Chapter 2

Hopper stood on the porch of his trailer for almost a full minute before he was able to gather the strength to reach into his pocket and pull out his keyring. He never used to keep the trailer locked (it was in the middle of nowhere and honestly, there was nothing of any true value inside), but after finding that government bug in his house not even three months ago, Hopper had felt more of an inclination to lock his door than he ever had before.

Inside the trailer, the living area was just as messy as Hopper had left it. Every few weeks Hopper would tear apart every single one of his belongings to look for any sort of recording device, find nothing, and then waste hours putting his things back together. Eventually he just stopped before the final step, and now pieces of what was once intact belongings littered Hopper's floor.

He stepped over the shards of a shattered telephone on his way in, then pushed an entire disassembled fan off the couch so he could sit on a sliced up cushion. He set the plastic grocery bag from Melvald's on the floor at his feet, not caring about the ice cream inside. It had probably already melted.

"I need a drink," he said to the empty air. In truth, the idea of Hawkins Lab listening in didn't make him nearly afraid as it might; Hopper knew that the chain of command was in total disarray after the death of Brenner and there was no way those sickos were organized enough to plant a bug in his home *and* actively listen to it in the midst of all that chaos.

Hopper stretched out his legs and groaned, ignoring the subtle ache that always set into his hip towards the end of winter.

"Boys, boys, boys," Hopper muttered to himself, eyes set on the Melvald's bag. "Take a break from the trouble for once in your life, why don't you?"

He had thought those idiots had been out of trouble, for good. "Those idiots" being Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, Mike Wheeler, and Will Byers, or "the party," or "the gang," or whatever they called their

little friend group.

It was mid January, over two months after the fiasco with the missing Byers boy and the bald girl in Mike Wheeler's basement and the Upside Down, and Hopper had thought everything was back to calm and boring Hawkins, Indiana. Will had been cleared by the hospital for home in early December, and soon after the four friends were back in the Wheeler's basement playing board games and bothering the neighbors. Hopper worried about them, yes, but marginally less than he had in November or hell, even in December.

He had been wrong to. He should have worried more. He should have been more watchful. He should have...

"What do you mean, 'are the boys going over to Mike's house tonight?'" Joyce repeated incredulously, a harsher response than Hopper had been expecting from some light small talk while Joyce was bagging his purchases at Melvald's. "Have you *seen* Mike around recently?"

*Yes, of course I have*, Hopper started to say, mouth already moving to form the words, but he stopped dead when he took a moment to actually consider the question. He had seen Mike Wheeler around town, racing on bikes with the other three hooligans or shouting about comic books outside of the movie theater, but in each memory, as Hopper tried to hone in on it, he realized that Mike was slightly off, slightly blurred. He hadn't taken the time to really *look* at Mike, sometimes sparing a vague wave in his direction but mostly just continuing on his way as if Mike hadn't caught his eye at all.

"No," Hopper answered, realizing Joyce was waiting for a response. "I guess I haven't."

"Oh," said Joyce, eyebrows raised and looking slightly taken aback. "Well... He hasn't been sleeping well. Since the whole thing with-" She paused, gave him a pointed look and said, "*You know*. Karen's been taking him to a therapist for a while now, and but it got so bad she took him to the hospital last Friday."

"*Last Friday?*" Hopper repeated in a low voice, fist tightening at his side. "Why didn't anyone think to tell me?"

Joyce frowned at him, clearly put off by his sudden show of rage. "Hopper," she said, "why would anyone tell you?"

She said it gently, but her tone didn't stop Hopper's heart from sinking in his chest. Joyce was right. There was no reason for Hopper to be notified. He couldn't exactly be called present in Mike's life, given he hadn't even looked in the boy's eyes since November.

"What's wrong with him?" Hopper asked, sighing.

Joyce bit on her lip, obviously considering whether or not Hopper was someone who needed to know the details of Mike's situation.

"Joyce," Hopper said gruffly, then reached out and put his hand on hers. "Please."

Joyce huffed and pulled her hand away, but her eyes stayed on Hopper. "Fine," she said. "Mike's been having nightmares for a while now. It's- It's gotten so bad he can barely sleep at all. I'm not supposed to know any of this, but I was dropping Will off and heard Karen and Ted talking to a doctor- they're talking about sending him to a children's psychiatric hospital."

"A children's psychiatric hospital?" Hopper took a step back from the counter, then stepped up again. "Why- A children's psychiatric hospital, for nightmares?"

Joyce looked down at the register and picked at some peeling paint. "It's not just that," she said. "Will was telling me about it- Mike thinks... Mike told Will, at least... He's been having these nightmares, and now... Mike thinks he can *feel*-" Joyce paused abruptly, then continued, "the girl. Sometimes- Sometimes he hallucinates that she's in the room."

Hopper paused, taking in this new information. "I know this sounds crazy but- Is there any way..." He trailed off, leaving the end of the question in the air.

Joyce shook her head. "No," she said. "It's hard, but- She's dead. Even if she somehow survived- the school- There's no way she made it through the winter in the other place. There's just no way."

"Yeah," Hopper agreed, gazing out of the storefront windows. "I'm, uh... I'm gonna go," he said, grabbing the plastic bag from Joyce and passing her a bill. "Keep- Keep it," he added, already halfway out the door and heading towards the Chevy. He tossed his groceries into the passenger's seat, and started up the car, radio coming to life with the engine. China Girl played too loud, but Hopper's arms felt glued to the steering wheel.

*I stumble into town/Just like a sacred cow*

*Visions of swastikas in my head/Plans for everyone*

*It's in the white of my eyes*

When Hopper thought back to it, he would have sworn the car ride to the hospital was finished before the song, although the drive had to have been much longer. In his head though, it was just China Girl, over and over, Hopper humming along absentmindedly at some points but mostly just clenching his jaw and focusing on the road.

"Mike Wheeler," Hopper said to the woman behind the desk the second he walked through the entrance. The couple she was helping scowled at him for cutting in, but Hopper just pulled out his badge and said, "Chief Jim Hopper. What room is Mike Wheeler in?" and the nurse sent him on his way.

Hopper set towards the children's ward with intent, with a mission. He was going to go in that room and he was going to speak to Karen and Ted, ask them what the hell they were thinking, and then he was going to speak to whatever scumbag doctor was nearest, ask them what the hell they were doing, and then he was going to speak to Mike and ask him what was wrong because god knows not enough people speak to that child like an adult, which he deserves (on occasion) after everything he's been through. Hopper made his way up the stairs to the children's ward and down the hall like a warrior with a quest to complete, but he stopped dead in his tracks outside Mike's room.

Inside, it was like a renaissance painting. Complete focus was on Mike. Karen was standing at his bedside, leaning over a mountain of pillows behind his head and running her fingers through his hair.

Holly was on the ground, toys forgotten as she stared up at her older brother. Nancy sat at the foot of the bed, arms crossed over a purple sweater like she was angry, but her eyes were red with tears. Even Ted, sitting in a wooden chair at the side of the room, wasn't looking at the newspaper in his lap but instead his eyes were fixed on his son.

There was a doctor in the room speaking to them, but even he was gazing at Mike, shoulders shrugged in an expression that was equal parts confused and apologetic.

At last, Hopper's eyes fell to the boy in the bed, fell to Mike. The already pale and thin kid was somehow paler and thinner than Hopper remembered him being, so much so that the white sheets almost swallowed him both in color and size. There were deep bags under his eyes, once sharp and observing but now seemed almost blurred. By his side, Mike was gripping the sheet so hard his knuckles were shaking and stark white. All attention in the room was on Mike, but as Hopper watched, Mike turned his head to the window and looked directly at Hop.

In a flash, Hopper was transported years back to the same ward in the same hospital, reading *Anne of Green Gables* to Sara and patting her smooth head. In an instant, the months Hopper spent, holding Sara like Karen was holding Mike, gazing at her like Nancy was gazing at her brother, listening to doctors apologize and apologize and watching as Sara grew weaker and weaker, all came rushing back. He was *there* again, back then, and it was all coming back in an instant.

"Mike, honey," Karen said inside the room, stroking his cheek with a finger. "What are you looking at?"

Mike blinked and turned his focus back inside the room. "Nothing," he said, and when Karen turned around to look there was no one there.

Hopper ran out of the hospital and sped back to his trailer in silence.

And now he was slumped in a shredded couch, surrounded by broken furniture and belongings. Broken man in a broken home, he thought to himself, and laughed out loud dryly.

There was a noise from the other room that could have been a pile crumbling or an intruder. Hopper didn't react, just got off the couch to bring the bag from Melvald's into the kitchen. He tossed the pint of melted ice cream straight into the trash, the toothpaste onto the counter, and the cigarette carton into his pocket, and that's when he heard footsteps in the hallway coming towards him.

"Eleven," he said as the girl stepped out of the shadows and into the scarce light. She was still in that dirty dress with one of his shirts thrown over as a massive jacket, face smeared in dirt even though he had told her she could shower. She looked up at him with a face so obviously full of need and fear it made his heart pang, but he still had to say what needed to be said.

"Are you trying to contact Mike?"

***A/N: PLEASE review! It's what makes writing and publishing fanfics worthwhile. All reviews are rewarded with an incredibly adorable picture of my dog, Kirk. Just specify in your review if you want one!***

***Shoutout to those who reviewed the last chapter, an anonymous reviewer, ILoveStydia (and I love your username), and CosmicChic97. Thanks a million!***

***I can be found on ao3 as fillmoredawn, twitter fillmoredawn, and tumblr save-will-byers, if you're interested!***

### 3. Chapter 3

Eleven stiffened, gripping the edge's of Hopper's massive flannel tightly around her.

"Mike?" she asked, eyes suddenly fixed on the floor. A flush had appeared on her cheeks behind the smears of dirt.

"Yes, Mike," Hopper said. Eleven might have had the lexicon of a small child, but they both knew she understood 'Mike.' "Are you using your... thing to try to communicate with him? Are you trying to talking to him?"

"Maybe," Eleven answered. Hopper sighed and got down on his knees to face Eleven eye to eye.

"Eleven," he said, gently placing his hands on either of her elbows. She looked at him with eyes full of fear and need, and Hopper pulled away quickly. "I'm sorry. Eleven, you have to stop trying to- to reach Mike. You need to stop. You're hurting him."

Instantly, Eleven's whole face changed, lips pressing together, eyebrows raising up, eyes widening like moons.

"No," she said, stepping backwards. "No, no, no, no, no!" She turned to run from him, but tripped on a turned over chair and went sprawling on the floor. Hopper raced over to her, but simply stood above her, unsure of what to do, while she sucked in breath and sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Eleven," Hopper said, gazing down at her like a giant. "You have to stop. You have to let him go."

Eleven looked up at Hopper with her teeth bared like a violent wild beast; so much so that Hopper took a staggering step backwards to put a defensive space between the two of them.

"No," Eleven said firmly, tears still flooding down her face, but her lips were fixed in a determined line.

"No?" Hopper repeated.



"No," El said. "I won't. You're lying to me."

"Lying?" Hopper's eyes were fixed on her. "Why would I lie to you?"

El's face froze like an arcade game loading the next level. Then her eyes narrowed victoriously.

"You don't want me communicating with Mike," she said, voice practically a hiss. "You said it's not safe, but you don't want me ever getting out of here! You want to keep me- prisoner!"

Hopper didn't answer, just looked at her and frowned. Eleven breathed heavily, her rage making her out of breath, but Hopper just looked and looked with his natural scowl. Eventually, he turned his back to Eleven, opened up the fridge and took out a milk carton, then closed the fridge door and stepped directly over Eleven to make his way back onto the couch. He popped open the milk and drank it directly from the carton. Then, he sat in silence, Eleven trailing cautiously behind him.

"You're lying to me," she said again, but she sounded less sure of herself this time.

"Okay," said Hopper, taking another swallow of milk. "Whatever you say."

Eleven frowned and shifted on her feet. "I'm... you said I'm hurting Mike. That's not true."

"Fine," Hopper said. For a moment, they existed together in perfect silence and stillness. Then, Eleven took a slow breath and sat down on the ripped up cushion beside Hopper. She took the milk carton out of his hand, tipped it back into her mouth, and passed it into Hopper's waiting arm.

"Honey," Hopper began, throat sticking on the word after not having a reason to say it for years. "It's the worst thing in the world to know somebody you... care about is hurting." With a hesitant hand, Hopper put an arm around Eleven's shoulders and pulled her closer to him. "I don't want you to have to suffer any more than you've already had to. I wouldn't lie to you."

"You say... I'm hurting Mike?"

"Yes," Hopper took a shaky breath. "You're going to kill him if you don't stop, Eleven."

She stiffened under his arm. "I don't want to stop," she said, refusing to meet Hopper's eye. "I'm close- to him. I'm close."

Hopper made a sudden noise of realization. "You're reaching to him right now, aren't you?"

Eleven shifted and pulled away from Hopper's arm. "Yes," she said, after a long pause. "Sort of... in the back of my head."

"Let me guess," Hopper said, standing. "You used to only... look for him at night, is that right?" El scowled at him, then nodded. "How long was it- a week or a little more when you started going full time?"

"Ten days," Eleven said. "I'm getting stronger."

"You're killing him!" Hopper shouted, the sudden raise in volume making Eleven jump. She sat on the couch as still and stiff as a doll. "You have to stop or you're going to kill him," Hopper said, softer and with a more apologetic tone.

"No," Eleven said, willfulness returned by his shout. "I *don't* believe you."

Hopper opened his mouth as if to speak, but all that came out was a wild shout. He turned his back on her and marched into the kitchen to toss the milk back into the fridge. When he returned to the living room, he grabbed his jacket from where he'd tossed it when he'd entered the trailer, slipped into it, and felt the pocket to make sure his keys were still there.

"I'm going out," Hopper said gruffly, mouth barely moving as he said the words. "Don't burn the place down."

He yanked the door open, only to have it immediately pull closed by a quick, invisible force.

"I won't believe you," Eleven said quietly from the couch, staring at the blinds covering the window as if she could see out onto the frozen lake, "Unless."

Hopper waited for her to continue, then turned around and leaned his back against the door, rubbing his shoulder absentmindedly. "Unless what?" he asked.

Eleven's tongue poked at the inside of her cheek, a long pause in the air while she figured out how to explain her feelings.

"Unless you take me to him," she said at last.

Hopper's leg twitched and he nearly fell to the floor, if it weren't for the door he was leaning on keeping him up.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

Eleven got up off the couch and walked towards the adjacent window. With a steady hand, she yanked the blinds off their hook, revealing the half frozen lake that lay beyond the window for the first time since Hopper had brought her back to the trailer and covered up every window in the place.

"Pretty," she whispered to herself, eyes scanning the trees weighed down with snow and the three deer tentatively making their way across the frozen lake.

"Eleven, what did you say?"

"Take me to Mike," Eleven demanded, turning away from the window to face Hopper. "Prove you're telling the truth and take me to him."

"He's in the hospital, he's in a public place, I can't just walk you in there."

"Take me to him," Eleven said slowly, narrowing her eyes as a challenge. "Take me to Mike."

Hopper swallowed audibly, then started to speak, describing to El all of the reasons why it was impossible to bring her to Mike, why she couldn't see him, why she couldn't enter the hospital, why she

couldn't leave the trailer, why she couldn't do *anything*.

But Eleven wasn't listening anymore. She turned her back to Hopper, and walked down the hall towards the small storage room where she spent most of her time on a raggedy futon.

"Take me to Mike," she said, one last time. The door in front of her opened on its own, then closed behind her when she stepped inside.

Hopper forced the front door open with a grunt and slammed it shut behind him. He jammed his keys into the ignition, hands shaking from something other than the cold, and started up the Chevy. Suddenly, a roar made its way up past his throat and left him screaming and banging on his steering wheel.

Then, he backed up the car and drove away.

***A/N: Big thanks to everyone who reviewed chapter 2, speedermeen, Alikattt, and Christmasfairy. Y'all rock!***

***If you're interested, come give me a follow on tumblr at save-will-byers. I'm also on ao3 as fillmoredawn.***

***Thanks for reading and please review! As always, reviewers will receive a pic of my dog! Just specify in your review :)***

## 4. Chapter 4

The sun was grazing the horizon as Hopper pulled up to the meager parking beside the Hawkins graveyard. He had maybe a half an hour until the entire area was pitch black. It was no matter, half an hour was plenty of time for what he needed to do.

Hopper tugged the keys out of his pocket and deposited them into his pocket, then grabbed the cheap floral arrangement he'd picked up from a farm stand on the way over. Hawkins in January, and old ladies were still selling flowers and honey from their kitchen windows.

He slammed the car door shut behind him and, clutching the flowers close to his chest to protect them from the wind, began the long trudge up the hill. Frozen grass crunched beneath Hopper's boots.

"Hey there sweetheart," he said, greeting the headstone with a familiar pat. He dropped the bundle of flowers in their wire slot, fully aware that they would either be frozen or stolen by sunrise. "How've you been?"

"Hiya, Chief," a voice called. Sam, the graveyard keep, approached him with his instantly recognizable limp and overalls faded purple to grey. "It's been a while."

"Not too long," said Hopper, crossing his arms in front of his chest. He felt strangely defensive.

Sam sucked on his teeth, considering. "Since... December, wasn't it? Used to see you here every week."

"Been busy."

"Oh yeah?" there was a glint in Sam's eye that made Hopper hesitate. "Busy with what?"

Hopper didn't answer. The kids in town said that tending to the graveyard for so long let Sam speak to the dead. Hopper didn't believe that for a second. There was just... something unnerving

about the way Sam looked at him, like he was gazing right into Hopper's core.

"What's on your mind, hey Chief?" Sam asked, pulling Hopper out of his near-trance. Hopper turned away from Sam, looking out at the trees at the edge of the graveyard. Bare branches rustled from the force of the wind. Hopper couldn't feel any wind at all.

"I've- been thinking," Hopper said, feeling like a puppet on a string, forced to speak. His face had become utterly loose, uncontrollable. "If she were still alive-" here Hopper had to stop, staring up at the grey sky and begging for a breeze to come and dry the tears out of his eyes. "If she were still alive- Would I rather her be happy, or safe?"

Sam hissed in a breath through loose teeth, clucking his tongue as he considered. "Could she not be both happy and safe?"

Hopper licked his lips. "Well- if I... If I had to- pick. One or the other. If in order for her to be happy, I'd have to put her in danger. But if I could ensure her safety- and I could- I'd be making her miserable."

"Seems a pretty odd thing to consider," Sam said, but continued before Hopper could respond. "I guess you just have to decide... Is safety worth suffering? To me... To me making someone safe is its own form of danger. But I'm afraid I'm not sure. What's this all about?"

"Don't worry about it, Sam," said Hopper. "Thanks for the help."

"The dead aren't ever really gone, you know that, right Chief?" Sam said, almost urgently, as if he had to get the words out before Hopper departed. "They die, but... They're never really... Never really gone. You know?"

Hopper stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. "I'm not sure I do, Sam."

Sam stepped forward and put an oddly warm hand on Hopper's shoulder. "I like to look at the headstones," he confessed, placing his own hand on his shoulder as if to comfort himself, "and calculate how old they'd be if they had never died at all. What they'd be doing now. I've got old bones who'd be in their 140s and poor little babies who'd

be turning one year old this summer." Sam reached out and tapped the headstone in front of them. "She'd be starting 8th grade this September," he said, and began walking past Hopper, feet crunching on the frozen grass. "Funny how those things work out sometimes, isn't it?"

Hopper let Sam pass him by, a half-sob working its way up his throat. He outstretched a hand and was suddenly leaning against his little girl's headstone, a piece of carved rock the only thing stopping Hopper from falling to the ground and beating the earth with his fists.

A sort of warmth emanated from the headstone, one Hopper was sure he was completely imagining. It helped him anyway, to push back the tears that were threatening to rise to the surface. Not yet.

Maybe soon, Hopper thought to himself, turning and seeing that Sam was nowhere to be found. Not yet. But maybe soon.

He patted the gravestone to say goodbye and set off towards his car. He'd be back.

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"Alright," Hopper said, before he had the door completely closed behind him. He dropped a new plastic bag from Melvald's in the entryway. Eleven looked up from where she was standing by the window, carving patterns onto the iced over glass with her little fingernails.

"Huh?" she asked. Hopper didn't know if she hadn't heard him or if she didn't know what 'alright' meant. Maybe both.

"I said 'alright.'" Hopper dropped his hat on the hat stand and tossed his coat on a hook with practiced ease. "I'll take you to Mike on Monday. Also, I'm thinking ice cream for dinner."

Eleven's eyes narrowed, she crossed her arms. "Really?"

Hopper let his gaze pass over her. She'd need a shower, of course, and clean clothes. And a hat, a big hat, to cover up her conspicuous haircut.

"Yes," he said, reaching into the grocery bag and pulling out a whole tub of mint chocolate chip, "to all remarks."

Eleven's smile was so big it made his chest ache.

For a moment, watching her giggle and gasp and lick all the ice cream out of her dish and then ask for more, Hopper was able to convince himself that he was doing the right thing. But all it took was one thought of Mike Wheeler, lying so small and so nearly unconscious in that hospital bed, and Hopper couldn't fight the sinking feeling that come Monday, everything was going to go horrifically wrong.

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***A/N: Thanks so much to all those who review! You're all so kind and wonderful and I really do appreciate each and every single one of you. I'm talking speedermeen, AliKatt, iAmCC, iKorak, Guest, and a big thank you to phieillydinyia!***

***If you enjoy this chapter, please consider leaving a review! I cannot put into words how much it means to me.***

***For more updates, follow me on ao3 at fillmoredawn and on tumblr at save-will-byers. Thanks for reading!***



## 5. Chapter 5

Mike Wheeler was splintering. He knew it, his doctors knew it, and when he looked into the eyes of his friends, he knew that they knew it too. No number of forced jokes or could hide the sadness that Mike could hear in every laugh, feel in every lighthearted nudge.

Mike didn't need cheering up from them, because he wasn't sad. He wasn't real anything. It was like there were two versions of him, mind and body. It had become either mind *or* body for Mike, that was the issue. Sometimes, rarely, he was both. Mike Wheeler was splintering, and eventually he was going to crack completely. And then he'd never be whole again.

"-Mike, dude, can you even hear me at all?"

The words dragged mind-Mike back to body-Mike, just enough for him to focus his eyes on the burning white hospital room. Dustin was leaning against the wall opposite him, Lucas was standing by the foot of his bed, Will was leaning his body on the side of Mike's pillows, El was- not there. Absent. Mike could have sworn she had just been there. Where did she go.

"Earth to Mike," Dustin was saying from across the room. "Are you awake right now?"

"Yes," Mike forced out. His tongue felt all-consuming, too large and too dry. Body-Mike. "I'm... Yes."

"Mike, you gotta cut this out," Lucas said as an order, not a statement. "What do we have to do? We'll get Nancy, or Joyce, or Hopper, how do we undo this? Before you spill good, and the government comes a-knocking."

"Government," Mike repeated. Dustin threw his hands up. "I'm fine," Mike said, what he always said when someone had too loud of a reaction.

"Mike, you're scaring us," Will tapped his fingers on a pale hand resting on the bed. Whose hand was that? Will was staring at Mike

and started to tap on the hand more insistently. Oh. So it was Mike's, then.

Mike looked up at Will, trying to conjure the words that would make him understand.

"She's close," was all he could manage. Not right. Lucas was shaking his head.

"Son of a bitch." Dustin leaned off the wall and came to stand next to Lucas at the foot of the bed. "Stop talking about you-know-who, Mike. Or the government is going to *end* you."

Mike frowned. "End?"

"Forget it," Lucas said. "Mrs. Wheeler will be back any second, don't get him riled up."

Dustin groaned and began saying something to Lucas, but Will started talking to Mike at the same time and Mike's brain couldn't comprehend both conversations.

"What does it look like?" Will was saying, voice tight. He gripped onto Mike's hand. Mike squirmed. Body-Mike. "What does it feel like?"

Mike didn't know how to answer, but Will continued before Mike could tell him that.

"Is it... wet? Sort of slimy? Dark? Can you see it? Can you feel it? Is it watching you?"

It struck Mike that Will was talking in a hushed tone, trying to slip the words into Mike's ear without Dustin and Lucas catching onto them. Will squeezed Mike's hand to prompt an answer.

"No..." he started, and the terrorized fire behind Will's eyes instantly died. Mike didn't know if that was good or bad. Mike was about to continue, ask him what he meant with those questions, but something jolted inside of him and he couldn't, he couldn't, he *couldn't*.

Something was squeezing mind-Mike and body-Mike together, all the way. There wasn't any space for both anymore. Mike felt a burning, but he couldn't tell if it was in his chest or in his brain.

"She's on her way," Mike whispered, gripping onto Will's wrist so tightly Will winced, but didn't pull away. "She's going to come, she's going to come, she's coming."

"I believe you," Will promised. Mike nodded, but wouldn't stop repeating, "she's coming, she's coming," over and over again with wild eyes.

Dustin stood up from his chair in the corner. "Mike, dude, you've gotta stop that." Mike didn't show any sign of having heard him, eyes fixed on Will. Dustin looked to Lucas for assistance.

"Mike, you signed *government* papers saying you had to keep your mouth shut," Lucas told him, not ungently. "So stop... You have to stop talking about her. *Eleven*," he hissed, glancing towards the door like government agents were going to come through any second. "Okay?"

For a moment, Mike froze. Then, he squeezed down on Will's wrist so hard Will shouted in pain, and Mike screamed.

"She's coming!" he yelled. Mike fought against the empty air, kicking off the blankets and yanking the IV from the back of his hand. Will tried to force him back into the bed, but even weak and sleep deprived, Mike was bigger than Will, was coursing with adrenaline, and had Will's wrist trapped in a death-grip.

"Mike, what are you doing?" Dustin demanded. "Stop that!"

But Mike would not stop. No sooner had his bare feet hit the tile ground than he was running towards the door, pulling Will behind him like a kite.

"We have to go to her!" he insisted. "We have to find her!"

Lucas grabbed Mike by the shoulder and pulled him away from the door, all three of them sprawling to the floor. Dustin was hitting the call button like his life depended on it.

"She's coming!" Mike screamed, and beat at Lucas with his free hand. Lucas wrapped his arms around Mike and held on as tightly as he could.

"Mike, stop it!" Will ordered. His voice faltered and he yanked his arm as hard as he could. Still Mike would not release him.

The door burst open, smashing into the wall and bouncing back. The nurse in the doorway caught it and slammed it closed behind her.

"What's going on in here?" she demanded, calmly but hurriedly filling syringe and dumping a bottle onto the guest chair.

"Don't- know-" Lucas choked out from the floor. "He won't stop!"

"It's all under control now," the nurse said, even though it was very much not. Mike was fighting, hard, and shouting at them through clenched teeth. "Hold him still as you can for just a moment longer, okay?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Dustin shouted, flapping his hands. "Wait, don't drug him, don't stick that in him-"

She didn't respond, except to kneel down beside Will and plunge the syringe into Mike's arm. Dustin yelped as if she had stuck him instead and slumped against the wall.

"No... No..." Mike protested, but he was already weakening. Lucas released him and Mike tried to push himself up but fell back again. "Will," he said, and gave Will's arm a weak squeeze.

"I'm sorry," said Will. Mike didn't appear to understand the words at all, eyes already glazed over.

"She's coming," he said again. "You have to be here when she comes. You have to..." He let go of Will's hand and his eyes fluttered closed.

The room stilled. The party and one stranger together in silence. Then, Karen came barrelling through the door, out of breath, took one look at her son and screamed. The nurse hurried to hush her. Lucas and Dustin pulled Mike up, angling his limp arms around their shoulders and rolled him onto the bed, legs hanging off until Will

pushed them up. Karen hurried over to his bedside, lacing her fingers through Mike's limp ones.

Nancy came running through the door, pressing her hand to her mouth with a horrified gasp when she saw Mike slumped over in his bed.

"Nancy," Dustin said, and started to reach out towards her. Nancy took a step backwards, nearly stepping out of the room. She hid her face in her hands and composed herself in an instant.

"What are you three still doing here?" she asked almost playfully, as if her brother wasn't unconscious in a hospital bed mere feet away, as if her eyes weren't red rimmed with over spilling emotions. "It's a Sunday night, you have school in the morning. Come on," she said, and waved them out of the room. The boys took one last look at Mike before Nancy swung the door closed.

"I don't know what's going on here," she said, tone changing dark the instant the door was closed. "If any of you know any more than me, tell me now."

They didn't say anything. Dustin tapped his fingers against his arm and Will stared at the floor. Nancy's gaze swept over them, scanning for any hint of suspicious activity.

"Okay," she said. "I'll drive you home. Let's go."

They followed her to the elevator in silence.

Every night after dark, Hopper's trailer would creak and shift, settling into its concrete base. And every night since Hopper had brought Eleven back to his home nearly 2 weeks ago, she had stayed awake all night, unable to sleep through the slightest noise. She was used to windowless prisons, not trailers where the door didn't close all the way and you could hear the wind whistling across the lake even when the windows were closed.

On that Sunday night particularly, El was unable to sleep. She sat by the window, the blinds pulled up once more and her gaze stuck on the half-frozen lake.

Behind her, Hopper had set out preparations for Monday morning. A fresh outfit from a distant thrift store. Car keys. The huge hat Hopper had pulled out from a box deeply forgotten at the bottom of the coat closet. And child's shampoo he had picked up early Sunday morning, with a huge "NO TEARS" label. Hopper had set it atop the pile with a nod to El, an understanding that if she wanted to leave the trailer, the mud caked to her skin had to go.

For now though, the items were forgotten. El was leaning against the window pane, her chin resting on her elbow. She breathed hot on the glass and rubbed to get a better view of the ice.

"Coming," she whispered, a silent promise to Mike Wheeler. She wondered if he could feel her speaking to him. "Ten-oh-oh. I'm coming. Tomorrow.

"Tomorrow," she repeated. The lake was frozen. Eleven touched her hand to her cheek.

Tomorrow.

***A/N: Big thanks to everyone who reviewed Chapter 4! It's a major drive to keep me going. Thanks specifically to speedermeen, Alikatt, phieillydinyia, Pondlake, and Guest!***

***If you liked this, PLEASE consider dropping me a review of any length. Or you can me. dm for more info.***

***On tumblr (save-will-byers), ao3 (fillmoredawn), and the big fat twit ( fillmoredawn). Me hope funny good. Thanks for reading!***

## 6. Chapter 6

Hopper had gone to sleep on Sunday night half-hoping he would sleep Monday away and wake up on a regular Tuesday morning. Monday, as Eleven kept reminding him with lots of urgent stares and pacing that certainly felt pointed, meant Mike Wheeler.

The weekend had been unbearable for both Eleven and Hopper, in near opposite effects. Each time Hopper returned with preparations, either the bag of clothes from Goodwill, or the worn hunter's hat he fished out of the closet, or a pair of sneakers 2 sizes too big from a yard sale, El flapped her hands and bounced on her heels, by far the most excited Hopper had seen her since he'd first found her dizzily stumbling through the woods.

Late Sunday night, El had left the shower (Hopper had had to wrangle her into like a frightened toddler- an apt description for El's approach to most new activities) dressed in clean clothes for the first time. Hopper had been leaving a message on Flo's office answering machine that he was feeling too ill to come into work the following morning. El squealed with delight, almost ruining the message, and shot across the room like a bottle rocket into Hopper's arms. For a moment, with her soft shaven head buried against his belly, Hopper could almost convince himself he was doing the right thing.

But then came Monday morning. Hopper woke up face down in his pillow and laid there for nearly a half hour, trying not to breathe too loudly, until finally his bloodstream demanded coffee too terribly to ignore for a second longer.

Every inch of the flooring creaked, so Hopper tried to step lightly on the pads of his feet. He had almost made it to the kitchenette, had just stepped out of the hall, and there was El, sitting with one elbow leaned against the window. She was so still, Hopper thought she might be asleep until she opened her mouth to speak.

"Morning," she told him, a statement. *Time to go.*

"Yeah, yeah," Hopper waved her off and stepped past her into the kitchen. "Coffee first. That's what the morning is for."

El got up and followed him, watching Hopper fumble for the can of coffee grounds. She was leaning over the island countertop, and the morning light combined with her clean face and fresh clothes, Hopper caught the watchful gaze not of a caged animal, but an attentive young woman.

"Then we go," she told him, once he had flipped the coffee maker on, "To Mike."

"Sure, but first you have to shower."

Eleven eyed him funnily, as if she were looking for a sign that he was joking. "Shower already. Yesterday."

Hopper avoided eye contact. God, she was boring holes with the heat of her gaze. "You might as well again, and put on a clean change of clothes."

El tugged at the new maroon sweater she'd only put on the night previous. "Today we go to Mike. You said."

For some reason, this only worked to infuriate Hopper. He whirled around from the coffee maker to face Eleven, who jumped back at the sudden movement.

"*Fuck*, Eleven, why does everything have to be so difficult?" Hopper demanded. "All I asked was for you to take a shower. Can't you just do what I say?"

Eleven's face darkened like a captive wolf. She knew the true meaning behind Hopper's words, even though she barely understood the language. Maybe *because* she barely understood the language.

"Friday you say Monday. Saturday you say Monday. Sunday you say Monday. Now it's Monday. Now we go."

"Not if I say we don't," Hopper said without thinking about his words. He splashed day old coffee grinds into the press. "I took you into my home. When I did that, I became your caretaker. You know what 'caretaker' means?"

El shook her head, eyes narrowed in barely contained rage. If Hopper



hadn't already been so strung out, he would have been afraid of the scowl she was sending him. As it was, he plowed ahead in the conversation.

"Maybe that can be a daily vocabulary lesson we can do." Hopper forced the coffee machine plug into the all, narrowly avoiding electrocution. "Friday's word was danger. You are putting Mike Wheeler in *danger* by trying to communicate with him. Saturday's word was government. The *government* is the group of powerful people the bad men worked for, the group that is still out there and would gladly take you back if they found out you're still alive, say, by venturing into a busy, public place like a hospital.

"Sunday's word was afraid- I am *afraid* of the D.O.E. capturing you, hauling me in right behind you, and probably bringing in Mike Wheeler too, for communistic actions or whatever else they can bury him under. I am *afraid* of being arrested by the secret government. I am *afraid* of those people getting you back so they can pick up their experiments right where they left off. I am afraid of ruining Wheeler's life, and I'm afraid of ruining your life, and I'm afraid of losing you!"

The words tumbled out of Hopper's mouth before he could even process them himself, and once he realized what he had said he groaned and pressed a hand to his forehead. El tilted her head.

"What's D.O.E.?" she asked. Hopper slumped into a chair.

"Department of Energy." The day had only just begun and already Hopper's voice felt rubbed raw. "They're part of the government. They authorize... They *hire* the bad men."

Eleven nodded, seemingly satisfied with this answer. Hopper couldn't help but feel that she didn't understand the situation at all.

"Eleven," he said. "You have to stop... Stop trying to reach Mike. You have to trust me when I tell you you're hurting him. If we go out there today, I can't guarantee it's going to be safe. I don't want you to get hurt."

Eleven clenched and unclenched her fists. Her lips moved soundlessly as she flipped through her rather thin lexicon to convey her point.

"I have to," she started, "Ask."

"Ask what?"

"I have to ask Mike."

"What are you going to ask him?"

El looked down at the floor and rubbed her palms on her jeans. She was nervous, Hopper realized.

"About the... The Snow Ball."

Hopper frowned. "Are you and Mike Wheeler planning a snowball fight?"

Eleven shook her head. "No. Like..." She scratched just above her ear, fumbling for the right words. "Like cheese?"

"Cheese?"

"But he's not my brother," she added, more insistently.

Hopper nodded and tapped at his chin. "Not sure I'm picking up what you're putting down, soldier." Usually, he tried to speak as simply as possible, but he could scarcely understand every third word coming out of El's mouth.

"Mike," El said, and she didn't try to explain further. She looked at Hopper, head tilted to the side so her ear was nearly resting on her shoulder. For a- what, 13?- year old, she looked. Unbelievably tired. More tired than Hopper had felt in a long time.

In a flash, Hopper was thrown into a memory of holding Sara tight in his arms, so vivid his fists clenched around nothing. He remembered leaving the gym that night before everything went to shit, remember looking back and seeing Eleven sopping wet, in that pink dress before it got coated in dirt and blood and whatever other alternate-dimensional goo was crusted to the clothes on the floor of Hopper's bedroom that very minute. Mostly, he remembered the way her head was resting on Mike's shoulder, her whole body limp and leaned against him. Without Mike there to hold her up, she would have been

sprawled out across the floor of the gym.

"We have to. Go to him," El said, slowly, cautiously. Her lips were held tight and her arms were shaking by her sides. All at once, Hopper understood. She *needed* Mike. Maybe not needed in the fact that she needed to endanger everyone in Hawkins by seeing him daily. But she at least deserved to know that he was safe, and to help keep him safe, instead of damaging him even more with her head in the sand.

"Fine," Hopper seceded, and just like that El's head straightened up and her lips turned upwards into the beginnings of a smile. "But breakfast first. I'm serious about that."

El nodded and took a seat at the kitchen counter, knees bouncing against one another. "Then we go."

"Yes," Hopper said, reaching blindly for a pan. El always marveled at the way he mixed scrambled eggs. "Then we'll go to Mike."

The pace of El's bouncing knees accelerated. Hopper pulled the egg carton out of the fridge. As it was, he couldn't help but feel like he was preparing the last meal for him and Eleven, together on death row.

---

The car ride over to the hospital was silent, mostly because Hopper hadn't introduced Eleven to music yet and he wasn't sure how she'd react to a car radio. El sat in the front, fingers gripping at the seat belt like if she loosened for even a second she would go flying through the windshield. Hopper couldn't go over 30 without El letting out a terrified squeal and kicking her legs against the dashboard as if to brace herself.

They got to the hospital at 11, but Hopper circled around twice looking for the safest place to park. He eventually settled on a roadside spot across the street from the back entrance to the hospital. Illegal, yes, but kept mostly out of view by a branch weighed down with snow. Besides, who would tow the car that read SHERRIFF on the side?

"Okay," Hopper said, pulling the keys from the ignition and tucking them into his back pocket. Eleven sagged around the seatbelt at the sound of the engine settling, looking very much like she had narrowly survived a drag race. "Hat on."

El pulled the hunter's hat out from the glove compartment and smashed it onto her head, more or less covering the buzz. El looked at Hop, hat staying just out of her eye line, and Hopper gave her a thumbs up. She squinted at the gesture, then repeated with her own hand.

"Good," said Hopper. "You know the plan. We get in, we see Mike, we get out. You are not to talk to him. Just see that he's alive and that you need to give him some space, okay? If you approach him, you'll only be putting him in *danger*, okay? Remember danger?"

El nodded, but she had a faraway look in her eyes, and Hopper knew he couldn't even begin to imagine what she was planning. What she had probably been planning, gazing out at the lake late at night when she thought Hopper was asleep. Probably, she had a completed itinerary of exactly how she was going to ruin the entire mission and get them all arrested. He would have to keep a close eye on her once they got inside.

"Don't be stupid," Hopper told her, as an abridged version of the rules he had drilled into her all weekend long. "We're not stupid. You ready?"

El nodded, and Hopper reached over to open the car door for her. By the time he had left his own seat and made his way to the other side of the car, El had already figured out the seat belt and was standing outside the door. She was a smart girl, Hopper realized with a pang. No amount of torture or experimentation or lack of a natural, social childhood could change that.

Hopper began to guide El across the deserted backcountry street, firm hand resting on her shoulder. Instead of gazing around at the street and the hospital in amazement, like Hopper had expected El to do, she was looking up at him, and Hopper had to wonder if she could read minds (among other abilities), because she repeated "We're not stupid," and slipped her small, soft hand into Hopper's as if it were

the most natural thing in the world.

***A/N: Obviously, absolutely MASSIVE thanks to everyone who reviews! Makes the whole thing worthwhile. :) Huge thanks specifically to phieillydinyia, Starla Marie Locke, AliKattt, Two Guest reviewers, and Emma! Thanks for the motivation, and sorry specifically to you all (and also everyone else) for the big waits between chapters.***

***Obviously, this ain't about me but! The wait was not out of pure laziness. Since last updating, I've been in the process of applying for a full scholarship to do a semester in Amsterdam (I've never left America before), I started what will hopefully be my third published novel, I've been working 2 jobs that I love, and I've been seeing a gender therapist about identity and how society changes the way we view ourselves. So it's been busy! I love my dog, I love my friends, and I love writing this story. But I don't love reading for clarity. So if something in here doesn't make sense or there's a typo or you think I left out a word or maybe an entire paragraph, send me a review or a PM to let me know, and I'll fix asap.***

***Thanks for reading this far into the author's note. Hope you liked this chapter (and that you reviewed!) and I'll hopefully be back with the next installment in a few weeks. Until then, I'm on tumblr as big-dumbass. See you soon!***

## 7. Chapter 7

"Shit," Hopper said, turning in circles in the center of the children's ward, feeling very much like a lost dog. He took careful notes of his surroundings as he went, memorizing locations faster than an interior designer on a time crunch. "Shit, shit, shit shit shit. Fuck! Shit."

Usually, he tried to watch his language around El. She ate up new words like a sponge, and he certainly didn't want her wandering about at 13 years old with the mouth of a sailor. People noticed those kinds of things. He didn't want Eleven noticed at all.

"Shit," Hopper repeated again. He didn't have to watch his mouth anymore. It didn't matter. Because he had specifically told El sit in the plush chair in the hallway and wait for him. He'd been gone barely 10 minutes, on completely unavoidable business. But none of that mattered.

What mattered was that El was gone.

---

*30 minutes earlier*

Hopper rounded the corner quickly but trying not to look like he'd just somersaulted off the set of a Bond movie. It wasn't too difficult, because El was gripping the bottom of his coat like a blind rat. Hopper had never seen a spy movie where the sidekick was a 13 year old with super powers.

Or maybe he was the sidekick. Hopper didn't know anymore.

"Oh sh- Darn it," Hopper muttered, and yanked Eleven back around the corner. "What are they doing here on a Monday at 11 am? Doesn't anyone in this town have anything to do with themselves? Work? School?"

"Who?" El stuck her head out around the corner to peak. Hopper pulled her right back.

"Karen and Nancy Wheeler," Hopper said in a hiss. He had a tight

grip on El's wrist and she wriggled to get out of it. Hopper let her go and pointed around the corner as casually as he could. "Sitting in the chairs by the big desk, see?" El's gaze laser focused when she spotted them.

"Nancy," she said. Hopper nodded.

"Yeah, and the woman next to Nancy is Mike's mom."

El's face softened and her eyes grew big. "She's tired," El placed, studying the bags under Karen's eyes and her frizzy hairstyle. "More tired... Than in the pictures."

"The photographs in Mike's house?" El nodded. Hopper put an arm around her shoulder and walked El out of the Wheeler's view. "Yeah, kid. She looks that way because she's worried."

"Worried."

"About Mike, Eleven. What you're doing, trying to- Project yourself into his head. It's hurting him."

Over the weekend, anytime Hopper had alluded towards the possibility that Mike was suffering because El, she had turned sullen and stiff and (at varying volumes) told Hopper that he was a liar. Now after seeing the distress of the two Wheeler women, she nodded.

"Mike's room is past where they're sitting," Hopper said, deliberately vague about which of the three hallways led to Mike. Eleven must have heard that in his tone, because she looked down at the three options, and when she looked back up at Hopper, the muscles around her eye twitched. Just that was nearly enough for Hop to grab her by the waist and carry her out of the building.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen." Hopper pushed down his caution and suspicion by taking control of the situation. "I'm going to invite Karen and Nancy down to the cafeteria for coffee or- hell, even lunch. As soon as we've paid, I'll... fake a police emergency and come back up here. That should buy us 10 or 15 minutes for sure. Until then..." His eyes scanned down the hall they had come from.

"Here!" He guided her over to a padded chair, likely strayed from its

waiting room location. "You can wait here."

Eleven looked at the chair and back up at Hopper. He didn't have time to deal with her untranslatable language that consisted entirely of minute expression changes. "Sit down," he told her, and tucked his hands under her armpits to lift her into the chair.

"Stay. There." Hopper said the words slowly. He didn't know how to articulate the importance of the order in terms Eleven would understand. "Don't move, for any reason. I'll be back in 10 minutes top. Until then, please, please, stay in this seat."

"Yes," El agreed. She leaned back into the cushion. Perhaps Hopper was imagining it, but she appeared stiff, as if ready to jump up and run away the instant Hopper turned his back. He wanted to say something. He bit his tongue.

"Okay," he said, bobbing up and down on his heels. A nervous habit he had broken in high school resurfacing. "Okay, then. Wait here and I'll be back soon, okay? I'll be back soon."

El nodded, with a shimmer in her eye that said, go on. Hopper didn't know how to argue with a look. He turned and walked down the hall toward the Wheeler women. Step. Step. Step. He wouldn't look back. He wouldn't. She'd stay. He trusted her.

He shouldn't have.

---

Eleven had wanted to stay where Hopper had told her to. Really, she had. But this place, this- Hospital, Hopper had called it- There was something enthralling and terrifying about it. It was almost like the school Mike, Dustin, and Lucas had brought her too. Only... More ages of people. More sadness. And... Something else.

The smell in the air. It wasn't exact, but Eleven could place it well enough. A closeness to- her home? A place she had lived? Or, "the lab," as Hopper called it on late night rants. It seemed too informal a term for the place 011 had spent nearly all of her life, happy memories or not.



El pushed herself away from the chair. No more of that. She was El now, not a prisoner or an experiment. She could do as she pleased, go where she pleased, no matter what anyone told her. No matter what anyone told her.

She took off toward the seats that Karen and Nancy had occupied only minutes previous. Hopper must have already forced them into the elevator under the guise of hot coffee. Good. All three of them would be out of her way for a little while, at least.

She reached the chairs and let her fingers glide along the varnished armrest of one. Nancy had been here. And Mike was so close. So, so close.

Left. Right. Forward. Three hallways, three options. One led to Mike Wheeler. The others were a waste of time.

El closed her eyes and tried to reach out to Mike. She had been able to feel the bond growing stronger as she and Hopper had been driving to the hospital but now, at such close range, the specificity of the connection was fading. Mike was near. She just didn't know where.

After taking a quick look around to make sure she wasn't drawing anyone's attention, El began tracing a pattern into the armrest. She needed something to calm her, something to draw her in so that she could focus her abilities. She needed to reach out-

There. El's hand squeezed into a fist, and the sense fell away. But she had felt... Something. And it was coming from straight ahead.

Mike. El stepped forward. She was coming.

---

The place El wandered into was more densely compact. People were sitting in chairs, some curled up and sleeping as if they'd been there for hours. Each of them looked not unlike Karen and Nancy, their worries, distresses, and pains etched into each line on their foreheads, around their eyes, in the way they held their arms around their stomachs.

It hurt El to be near, yet at the same time, she couldn't tear her eyes away. People, real people right in front of her! And so much more- a new color of tile on the floor, art on the walls, beeping machinery and an electrical hum.

"Ooooh," El stopped mere inches from the object that had caught her eye, so close that her nose was nearly touching it.

"Hello," she whispered. She hadn't yet been acquainted with this type of item.

A metallic box that rose nearly twice as tall as she stood, and inside was treats, some she recognized from her time with Mike, others she had never seen before. Beverages, plastic bags of snack food. Some columns were empty and held only a strange metal coil.

In the lower left corner, El noticed a chocolate pudding cup. In her mind, she saw a flash of that stupid tricolored hat. Dustin...

Her hand came to rest on the layer of glass that separated Eleven from the chocolate dessert. Dustin would want it, he would be sad if he didn't have it. She could take it and give it to Mike, and he would give it to Dustin. Otherwise... Otherwise she was being a bad friend. 011 could harm, she could steal, she could kill... But she couldn't be that.

But how to get it? The glass was thick, and if the keypad on the side was anything like the ones she had seen in captivity, she would need some sort of secret code to get in. She could break the glass, but it would ruin her chances of finding Mike.

How could she get the pudding cup? She tapped insistently on the glass, as if it might break naturally. How? How?

"You want a dollar?" a voice asked from behind her.

El knew who it was, even before she turned. She could feel the pure energy she had clung to on many dark, hopeless nights. She would know that feeling anywhere, in deep peril, in death, trapped in two opposite worlds: close but far. She knew him like a twin, like an alternate, like a reflection. Yet before that day she had never truly

seen him.

Will Byers smiled and held out a dollar.

*A/N: As always, no I have not re-read this after writing it, so any typos or bad writing is my own fault.*

*HUGE thank you to all the people who review and even private message me here and on tumblr ( big-dumbass), you guys are truly the reason any chapters get out at all. It's looking like... it's gonna be 10 chapters in total, but it truly could be more or less than that. I never really know.*

*Beautiful reviewers! Amazing amazing amazing work you are all so kind and wonderful and I truly appreciate ANY message, even if it's just a word or two. Or even a harsh critique is acceptable. But I had so many wonderful reviews left, I wanted to thank each of you individually and take a moment to respond to your comments:*

*Phieillydinyia: I was so, so, so touched by what you said! I'm glad you've been finding enjoyment in this story! Glad the Hopper and El reads well to you, as it's basically just me typing blind and hoping my brain is making something good. Sorry this chapter isn't as Mileven-y as you'd hoped! Hopefully the next few chapters are better for that. :)*

*noDownSide: Thank you! I'm glad the emotions are getting across. This was originally only going to be one chapter, and then three, and now it's waaay longer than I originally anticipated, so I'm glad the underlying darkness is still creeping in. Thanks for the amazing review!*

*Starla Maria Locke: I'm so glad it came across! I always worry about getting across their emotions without pushing too hard or just flat out telling the reader, so I really appreciate the assurance! Thanks for the review!*

*strangerpotter: Aaaaaaah so glad you've been enjoying! Thanks for joining the party :) Hope it reads well all together because I've been writing this for over 9 months now! Wowza! Thanks for reading + reviewing and I hope you get as much out of the coming chapters as*

*the previous ones! Thanks!*

*tank03: Your review is so sweet to me. I'm so amazed at how many people have been looking forward to my crazy sporadic updates. I really hope this chapter is worth the wait! Thank you for the review and for giving this story a read*

*AliKattt: Your review was so fantastic I was so touched and have been reading it over and over again as I've been writing Chapter 7. And whoo... I don't know what you're thinking, but if it's anything NEAR what I'm thinking... I don't want to give anything away so I won't say more but. Hoping my dumb brain can pound out the next couple of chapters fast, for your sake and for mine. I'm hoping you love this chapter as much as (it seems) you loved the last, and I can't wait for you to see how your theories compare to what ends up happening. Thank you for the FANTASTIC review you're doing amazing work motivating me. !*

*Emma: Emma, your reviews are soooooooooo great! It's truly wonderful to be sitting around, weeks after the last chapter was published and get such a funny and amazing reminder that readers are still out there waiting! I love your reviews and your ideas and I can only hope that the story pans out in a way that satisfies you. Keep doing what you're doing and stay awesome!*

*Next chapter coming to a near you soon!*

## 8. Chapter 8

When Nancy and Mrs. Wheeler had offered Will a few minutes alone with Mike, Will had expected to make use of it. When his mom told him he could have the day off school to stay with Mike, Will had brought along crayons and paper, content with the idea of merely sitting in Mike's presence.

When Mrs. Wheeler had abruptly said she needed air, and when Nancy had glanced at Will to say *you good?* before following her mother out of the room, Will had nodded instantly. Before the door had even closed behind them, Will had dragged his bulky chair as close to Mike's bedside as he could get it. Will had half-hoped the scraping of the chair against the tile would stir Mike. It didn't.

Will rested his head against Mike's mattress, hesitant even to breathe. Mike murmured something indiscernible, eyes still closed as if weighted down, and rested his hand across the back of Will's neck.

Will breathed deeply then, closing his eyes to strengthen the image he was drawing up in his mind. He placed Dustin and Lucas on the opposite side of the bed, Mike's basement coffee table on the hospital cot. If Will held his breath and focused hard, he could pretend Mike's hand resting between his shoulders was the way Mike clapped his back, tender but celebratory, when Will the Wise beat some particularly adverse monster. That last time they had played, in November, that- That last time. Mike had-

Clap.

Will pushed himself upright, falling backward and hitting his spine against the top rail of the chair. Mike's hand fell lazily onto the bed, but Will... Will could have sworn he'd felt Mike's joyful, winning pat.

Will shoved his chair back, wincing at the scrape it left on the tile. He shot one guilty glance to Mike and then to the door.

"Close," Mike murmured, accompanied by a string of incoherencies. Will traced the outline of the bed as he moved towards the exit. There were magnets in the tips of his fingers, pulling him in from the

end of the hallway. Will tried not to tell himself he was imagining an excuse to abandon Mike.

"I'm staying close," he promised, and opened the door. Ignoring the sinking condemnation in his belly, Will left and closed the door behind him.

---

"You want a dollar?" he asked, and offered it out in his hand.

It was like Will had been struck by a blast of lightning. His hair stood on end, his limbs snapped stiffly as if petrified. She looked at him and then at the dollar, and Will felt a *whoosh* of air sucked from his lungs.

"You," he said before he even knew what he was looking at, much less what he was saying. "I-

She shied away from him, eyes ferocious and panicked. Will pulled away too. He wasn't sure who had scared the other.

"Here," he offered, half as an apology, and fed the dollar into the machine. "Get whatever you want."

She said nothing. Eyes fixed on him, she tapped the glass in front of the chocolate pudding. Will felt the muscles around his mouth twitch into something resembling a smile. He typed in G-1 and the last pudding cup dropped, revealing the empty coil behind it. Dustin would be so pissed.

The pudding fell into the slot with a *flop* and the girl with the big hat dropped to her knees to pull it out, quick as a flash. She held it in her hands and her face seemed to lift just by looking at it. Will typed in another code and a can of grape soda came barreling down. She pushed her arm through the flap to retrieve that, too, and held the pudding in one hand and the soda in the other, each clenched in a tight little fist.

"Could I... The soda?" Will offered out his hand. He felt bad to take it from her, but when she looked up at him, her small smile seemed huge across her face. As she exchanged it, her pinkie brushed Will's, sent a shock down his spine and left him gasping in a way he didn't

understand.

"I'm Will," he said. "Do you want to sit?"

Still she said nothing, but she followed him to a pair of chairs and sat. Will tapped his fingers on the armrest. She looked at him. He exhaled a heavy breath. She looked at him. He bounced his knees out of sync, let the motion vibrate through his whole body and come out of his ears like a hum.

She looked at him.

"Are you, um, a patient? Or something?" Will clenched his jaw, huffing internally at his own stupidity.

She blinked at him. "Um... Seeing," she said.

"Oh, like a visitor?" Will offered the word. She nodded and smiled again, pulling on the low hanging flap of her hat.

"Yes. Visiting."

Will stretched backward in his chair, still gripping the unopened can of soda. "Yeah, me too," he said. "I'm visiting my friend, Mike."

"Mike." She said it a fraction of a second after him, and for a slip instant, they were speaking in tandem.

Will nodded. He couldn't look away from her. Her big eyes, her muted facial expressions. How short was her hair, under that overwhelming hat?

"Mike," she said again. Reminding him... Urging him?

"Yeah, he's..." Will didn't know, he- His palms, his armpits, the underside of his knees, all prickling with sweat through a deep shiver working its way from inside him. He'd slipped before, into someplace *in between*, but never in public, never like this. He'd never felt it like this before, he'd felt it like this but. Never so- Connected. To what, he didn't know.

Will jumped out of his seat as if it had bitten him. "I'm, I'm, I really

should get back to him." He struggled to explain posthaste. She peered at him curiously.

"Where?"

"To Mike, to-" His hand was sweating around the grape soda, he clenched and released his free hand in an effort to fight off visions that weren't coming.

"That hallway," he said, and pointed, too distracted by himself to notice the glimmer in *her* eyes. "All the way at the end."

Will rubbed at his eye until it hurt. His skin was crawling, he felt-magnetized. His ears were ringing, his blood itched, he, he-

"I have to go," Will apologized, barely able to hear his voice over the high pitched cosmic hum. Something popped in Will's chest, and the can of soda exploded, sending purple fizz gushing down his shirt. Melting him.

"Sorry, I'm- I'll be right back." He backed away, felt the door of the bathroom behind him and pushed through. As the door swung shut, Will got one last look at the girl, watching him go and wiping her nose on her sleeve.

The door clicked shut with a resounding finality. The bathroom was quiet, dull. Will felt very much like passing through the door had somehow catapulted him into another universe, a reverse Upside Down where everything was exceedingly ordinary.

The symptoms from before had vanished, and if it weren't for the sweat stains at the peak of his sleeves or the rushing heat in his face, he might have doubted he'd ever felt anything other than average at all.

Even the ringing in his ears had left him, and in its place was a faint absence of sound- an emptiness. Will crushed the soda can and dropped it into the trash atop wet paper towels, thinking of the girl with the big hat and the way she clutched that chocolate pudding.

"Okay," Will said, voice and fingers shaking. He reached for the paper towel dispenser. The row of fluorescents above his head flickered



once, twice. A warning.

Will pressed a sticky hand to his mouth and tried not to breathe.

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*That hallway . All the way at the end .*

Eleven let the words carry her across the floor, stepping gently on each colored tile. As she passed down the hall, doors seemed to beckon, welcoming her. Not the right doors. Not yet. She wandered onwards.

*That hallway. All the way at the end.*

That's what Will had said, and now, Eleven leaned into the window, letting her forehead rest on the glass, and gazed downwards. To her right, a heavy door led to the stairwell. To her left-

He was within, El could feel it. His heartbeat pulsed in her chest. There was no need for own heart at this proximity, Mike's beat for her. She could feel it. She could feel *him* .

El laid her hand on the doorknob. The cool metal only served to exacerbate the sweating of her palms. She couldn't make her hand push forward.

Eleven turned back, hand still resting on the doorknob. The stairway was one escape. The window was another, if she could catch them both before they hit the parking lot pavement. She had saved Mike from the fall before. This time, the fall would save them both.

No more Hopper, no more trailer. No more hiding from Mike's parents. No more shut up in the basement all day. No more shut up anywhere.

*My parents can get you an actual bed for the basement. Or you can take my room if you want, since I'm down there all the time anyways.*

Mike was waiting for her.

*I'm close, she thought to him. She could feel his heartbeat through the door. Close.*

She twisted the doorknob and pushed.

A/N: Once again, I wrote this and immediately posted! Any errors or regular bad writing is my own fault. Come complain to my tumblr big-dumbass.

Originally, there was like 25,000 drafts of Will and Eleven's interaction that I had to scrap, as well as a scene between Nancy and Hopper that I ended up cutting from this publication. Thinking about saving the various scenes that I can't put up due to word count, sensibility, etc. and releasing them as bonus content after this story ends - probably in 2 chapters. Sorry that there couldn't be MORE Will and Eleven in this chapter, I worked really hard to get it in there but in the end it just didn't work. Hopefully you get to see more of them in bonus content.

Absolutely MASSIVE thank you to everyone who reviews and pesters and reminds me that people actually want me to finish writing this. It is literally the only reason I am ever able to put a chapter up. Your comments are all so lovely and really gets me in gear to write. Wanted to take another moment to reply to each of you individually.

phieillydinya: *Phew, that's a crazy username to type. Your reviews are always SO NICE! I am so pleased you find El's characterization realistic, I always struggle with her a lot because of her limited vocabulary, so I'm never quite sure how to translate her thoughts into words. So glad you were able to find enjoyment in the last chapter, and that I could give you a distraction from your family. Hope this chapter comes out at a convenient time for you too! Sorry this chapter was STILL not Mileven-y, hoping you find... a fulfilling amount in the penultimate chapter! Sooooooon (hopefully)!*

Starla Marie Locke: *Your username is so pretty, I love it. Now that I read it back, I reeeeeeally hope I'm not publishing your real name! Eek. But anyway, yes! That's so funny, I almost wish El had used her super powers to go junkfood crazy but. I needed an excuse to introduce Will into the story so El could have an easier time finding Mike! But that's a great image, thanks for sharing it with me. Stealing eggos from the supermarket 2.0. I am doing great actually! Just got to publish under my dude name for the first time and feeling*

*super excited about it. If you want, message me and I'll send you the link! Hoping you are doing well too and are having a great start to the new year!*

*speedermeen: Ahahaha! Will! I was super pleased when I came up with that line. I love writing Will but rarely get the chance, so I'm excited I got to do almost a whole chapter focusing on him. Hope you enjoy this one too, although there isn't as big of a twist as the last.*

*PondLake: Hope this interaction was pleasing to you! I went through about 10 drafts of this chapter (thus the lateness). This one had the least amount of true interaction between them, but all of the others just seemed to drag on for so long between the two of them and never get to Mike. Poor Mike indeed! So I wanted to get to him asap. So glad you're enjoying the writing, I've been going back and forth on the amount of apprehension and build-up, so I'm glad it feels right to you! Hoping you are doing well.*

*mcplestreet: I am so glad you enjoyed the last chapter! I worked hard on making that last paragraph suuuuper tight. Unfortunately I don't really... feel like I achieved that anywhere with this one, but it had been so long I just needed to get this chapter up so I could move forward. The connection between them is something I really wanted to explore more but felt like I couldn't within a reasonable word count. I have some drafts of this chapter I'm thinking about releasing later as bonus content so... hopefully you find some good content in this chapter and if not, in the coming ones! I really enjoyed responding to everyone individually, so much that I decided to again. Everyone says such nice and different, I like to take the time to reply to each one. And you write too! Excited to go take a look at your stuff when I have the time :)*

*Guest: Whoever you are ... Yes cliffhanger. Impossible to resist, as you can tell if you read this chapter too. Usually I'm better at... getting to the point, but not with this work for whatever reason. Hoping you are well and still reading!*

*AliKattt: Mmmmm your reviews are always so fun! So glad you didn't see last chapter's Will Byers cliffhanger coming. Hoping I did him justice in this chapter, although I know it felt rushed to me. I*

*am so glad you enjoyed the last chapter ... Hoping this one comes anywhere close in comparison and that the next two chapters can really wow you. Going to try to update soon, I swear! Although I know the last turn around has been... Um, long. Anyway, hoping you're doing well and have a really great start to your 2019!*

*Julia: Glad you enjoyed! Always nice to hear about someone coming across it last minute and delving in deep. I hope this chapter has been worth the wait!*

*Natasha romanoff: SO GLAD YOU LIKED! Yes, I did continue. It just took me a while (a very long while). I hope you like this chapter and that the next one comes out soon for you!*

*Sam: I am truly so glad that you have been reading and liking. This chapter is kind of shit but ... hopefully not TOO shit. I am continuing and hopefully soon I will be finishing!*

*Emma: Ahahahaha your reviews are so fun. So glad you care enough about my writing to continuously leave reviews to inspire me, I really enjoyed getting new reviews from you. You totally did NOT step over the line, but I hope the next chapter goes up fast enough that I don't have to leave you hanging like I did last time. Hoping you are well and that this chapter is worth the reviews you left me! Thanks!*

*Tyler: I was incredibly excited to get your review so long after the previous chapter had went up. Sometimes I don't write just out of forgetfulness, so reviews like yours are a great reminder. As you can tell, I really did take my time with Chapter 8. I am glad you have been waiting and I hope this chapter pays off. So pleased you like my style, especially by calling it unique because I feel like my style changes so much depending on the media I'm consuming while I write. This chapter has been heavily influenced by Black Mirror: Bandersnatch. Previous chapters have been inspired by Donna Tartt's the Goldfinch, Anne Carson's translation of The Bakkhai, inoubliable's IT ff on ao3, and more! But I'm so excited to hear that it seems to come off as a unique writing style to you. Anyway, thanks for bearing through this incredibly long response to your review, and I'm hoping you are having a fantastic 2019 and beyond!*

***Next chapter coming... Soon! Hopefully. You know how I am.***